

DISCUSSION RESPONSE

Rethinking containment through the EU-Libya Migration Deal

MARTINA TAZZIOLI — 23 October, 2017



In response to Nils Muiznieks, [Human Rights Commissioner](#) of the Council of Europe who asked Italy to clarify its relationships with Libyan militia, the Italian Prime Minister Marco Minniti [declared](#) on October 11 that Italy's goal is twofold: "to prevent migrant crossing which put life at risk [...] and to grant that international standards are respected in Libya". Minniti's speech should be analysed in the light of the recent overt incorporation of smugglers into EU's migration governmentality: since the signature of the most recent bilateral agreement between Italy and the Libyan government of Tobruk in March 2017, under the pressure of the EU, Italian authorities have strengthened formal and informal agreements also with Libyan militias; and, as many journalist investigations [have shown](#), Italy would have paid smuggling networks in order to suspend the logistics of migrant crossing. In this way, smugglers have become crucial partners of European states in governing, seeing containing migration, by preventing migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. Thus, the [EU-Libya Migration Deal](#) brings to the fore that governing migration is (also) about *governing through the smugglers*. In turn, migrants appear as the *biopolitical currency* of exchange between the EU, Libyan "official" governments and Libyan militias, around economic and geopolitical stakes that exceed by far the control over migration.

Against the background of such a restructuring of the Mediterranean migration space, Minniti's statement highlights the central stage gained by strategies of migration containment, marking a partial shift away from the "politics of rescue" that Italy performed during [Mare Nostrum Operation](#) between 2013 and 2014. This is not to say that under Mare Nostrum or before that, migrants were not object of push-back at sea, border violence and tactics of confinement. On the contrary, it is important to situate the ongoing restructuring of migration governmentality in the Mediterranean through a historical lens, retracing the longstanding geopolitical relationships between Libya (and Tunisia) and EU countries for regulating, channelling and hindering migration. Yet, drawing on Foucault's genealogical approach, which consists in finding discontinuities within series of historical continuities, it cannot pass unnoticed the twist from a military-humanitarian approach centered on saving refugee at sea, towards protecting migrants by keeping them in Libya. To put it differently, the politics of migration containment has not only become more visible and overtly declared by Italy and other member states; more than that, it now appears as the blueprint against which both humanitarian and security practices have been reframed.

What I want to suggest here is that the notion of “containment” has surprisingly remained quite under-theorised both in the field of migration studies and in geography scholarship, while it would require to be further conceptualised, also in the light of the above mentioned border displacements. Containment tends in fact to be conflated with confinement or detention and it is usually employed in the literature in opposition to mobility. How to account, instead, for tactics and effects of migration containment that do not necessarily result into detention or spatial confinement?

Rethinking containment, beyond the narrative of the Fortress Europe, involves distinguishing it from spatial confinement and not flattening the former into the latter. Indeed, while in some cases tactics of containment consist in producing effects of spatial confinement –e.g. migrants kept in detention and blackmailed inside the Libyan prisons –, they are not narrowed to that. Conceiving containment in a broader sense enables us, firstly, to grasp modes of governmentality that do mainly work by keeping migrants out (of Europe) or in (detention) and that, at the same, produce forced migration geographies. Secondly, it makes possible to move beyond the binary oppositions that usually underpin migration scholarship – such as between exclusion and inclusion, and between mobility and immobility: tactics of migration containment does not entail keeping migrants out nor immobile. Rather, containment can involve forms of economic exploitation and incorporation, and can be enacted also by keeping migrants on the move. Indeed, if we shift the attention from the Libyan prisons to what happens on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, it is noticeable that states try to regain control over migrants by forcing them to enact convoluted geographies, “bouncing” them multiple times from one border to the other and make them move across Europe. Containment can in fact be analytically tackled by bringing attention to ways in which migrants autonomous movements are troubled, decelerated and forced to spatial diversions as well as to temporary blockages. Thus, instead of thinking containment in opposition to mobility, we need to gesture towards an account of the containment-mobility nexus, looking at the ways in which, beyond detention sites, migrants’ presence and movements are hampered, through the disruption of migrants’ spaces of life. Importantly, by pointing to the ways in which states take (legal, existential and material) terrain away from migrants, I refer both to the harnessing of individual life conditions and to the neutralisation and disruption of any emergent collective formation as political subjects. Thus, containment is not only about containing the migration phenomenon but also about disrupting and undermining migrants’ spaces of life and collective formations.

Importantly, containment should not be seen as an overarching analytical grid through which reading the ongoing reshaping of migration governmentality as such. Rather, containment is one the many “border operations” through which states and non-state actors try to capture, trouble and capitalise on migration. Yet, if on the one hand containment should be conceptualised as part of a multiplicity of borders’ operations and without losing such an heterogeneity, on the other, rethinking containment beyond detention allows us capturing main reassemblages that are currently underway in the EU border regime. In particular, it is through the lexicon of containment that refugee humanitarianism is today recrafted: the politics of asylum is overshadowed by state’s discourse about protecting migrants from traffickers and from dangerous crossing. International organisations and refugee agencies play likewise an active role in enforcing a kind of *humanitarian containment*. In fact, it is in the name of human rights and international standards to be granted, that organisations such as IOM and UNHCR are currently part of the EU-Libya Migration Deal, “assisting” migrants intercepted and taken back to Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard, before being deported to Niger or transferred to prisons. Therefore, while containment is a geographical notion that points to spatial

effects, these latter are not narrowed to fenced spaces and consist also in convoluted movements that migrants are forced to enact.

As illustrated above, what can be called the *EU-Libya Migration Deal* brings to the fore the incorporation of the smugglers into the EU border regime for keeping migrants in Libya hampering them from crossing the Mediterranean. However, instead of considering it as an exceptional and extreme case of border violence, the Libyan migration frontier can be taken as a lens through which investigating heterogeneous tactics of containment that states and non-state actors put into place for regaining control over migration movements.

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This blogpost responds to last week's [post by Stefan Salomon](#).

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